

schitzophonia

I live in two places, or perhaps I used to. Not a luxury but indecision. I had a little apartment in town, Vancouver, and a little cottage on a nearby island, Bowen. Whenever I was at either for more than two days I would miss the other. It is not the excitement of the city or the calm on the island. Both are quite active and noisy, actually. But they're different: on the island it is the crash of waves and the swish of trees, and in the city it is the rumble of cars and the shouts of people. Whenever I have one I want the other. When I'm on the island I miss my cobbled city street and the brick buildings beside it. A sentimental Dickensian picture, with picturesque Dickensian scenes ignoring the tales of misery and oppression that they illustrate. And there are cobbled streets in Vancouver. When I'm in town I miss the violence and unpredictability of my island view. Trees falling down, the sea never the same for five minutes, storms blowing up in an instant, all under the guise of peaceful nature.

At first I thought it was the sights that I missed, the moving green of the trees and the white foam of breaking waves, the crowds of people around the shifting flashes of traffic. And I made a plan for this.

I pulled down my blinds in both places so that I could not see out the windows. Then on each of my two longer walls – they are small places so there is not much wall – I installed a large electronic screen, on which I played a looped film clip of waves and trees or buildings and traffic, taken on a perfect day with brilliant illumination. And, this was the really clever part, in each location I loaded the screen with the view from the window in the other. That way wherever I was I would get to see the other.

I stayed in the city for two weeks, perfectly content to look out of the non-windows and see waves, trees, occasional deer, and just sometimes an eagle. Then my feet got itchy and I went to Bowen. I couldn't stay still any longer. But on the walls of my cabin I had cityscapes, and I could sit there contentedly writing just as I had in town, while watching the traffic and the dogs and the people, and once even two cops jumping out of their car and arresting someone. This was fine for two weeks, also, and then I had to go back, couldn't stop myself. When I got back I had a good deep think about why I couldn't be content for long in either place.

It was the noises. Horns, barks, shouts, rumbles, sirens; swishes, crashes, hisses, hoots, growls. I wanted them all. And I could have them all. My first thought was that I would just switch the sights and the sounds around. And it was very strange. A deer wandered through the scene – I didn't think them as windows now – and out of her mouth came a police siren or a string of F-ing obscenity. A car crashed into another car with an impact of a softly folding ripple. Amusing, but not what I wanted. My next idea was better.

I edited the video into thirty second segments, and the same for the sound. Then I joined them up again with a constantly random pairing, so that half the time island video would be against city sound, and the pairs would rarely repeat. I had expected a jerky effect, constantly off balance. But instead it made me realize quite how different the two soundscapes were, not just in the sounds they contained but in their overall characters. Their harmony and orchestration, if you want. The city one was full, every frequency occupied, from way down so low you rather than heard it, up to about the pitch of a child screaming. And above that there was nothing. The island one was the opposite, very little except indistinct growls and rumbles down below, and then a

thick unbroken block of sound from baritone to high soprano, and then again very little constant but occasional squeaks and whistles way way up on top. So when I paired them up them it didn't sound like a multi-coloured patchwork as much as an alternation: first low plus nothing followed by nothing plus middle plus nothing, and then the first again and then the second again, and so on. But of course there was the random element, so a kind of rhythm would emerge. Bang Hiss Bang Bang Hiss Hiss Hiss Bang. I found it strangely calming.

So calming that I didn't want to move. But I wanted more sounds; I wanted more pictures. The internet gives them: WebCams. Across Canada there are WebCams in city centres, in high-rise buildings especially where wild birds raise their young, in parks. And they have soundtracks; the small cities are particularly well-equipped and the output is particularly rich. Medicine Hat, Winnipeg, Thunder Bay, Kingston, Trois-Rivières, Corner Brook. So all I had to do was to log on and record. Then I spliced them into my windows.

I still sit here writing all day. Here in my little place where ever it is. Is it in Vancouver or on Bowen or in Winnipeg or wherever? I really don't know anymore, and I can't say that I care.